TL 1485-2

Statement on East Timor
by Iwamura Shouhachi

United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization
August 13, 1987

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

As you know, the Japanese army occupied East Timor, a neutral country, for three and a half years, from February 1942 until the surrender. I was an army officer in East Timor for two years and four months, and was engaged in transportation, security, punitive operations and road construction. I was an independent platoon commander and a battalion adjutant stationed mainly in Baucau, Baquia, and Arianbata.

It is painful to speak today of the sacrifices and burdens we forced upon the East Timorese, a people who had nothing to do with the war. We ordered village chiefs to mobilize people en masse for road construction. And the people, obedient to their chiefs, gathered at these construction sites to work without receiving food or compensation. Because of food shortage people died of starvation every day. Food for Japanese soldiers and horses to transport ammunition were confiscated from the people, and some of the troops under my command raped Timorese women. Yet after the war, the Japanese government paid no war reparations to East Timor, because, it said, Portugal was not an Allied country.

In 1975 East Timor at last shed the long years of Portuguese rule and declared its independence. It thereby exercised its right of self-determination, a right guaranteed in the Charter of the United Nations. But immediately following this the Indonesian military launched an all-out invasion which has resulted in one of the greatest acts of aggression in recent history, claiming the lives of up to one-third the population of East Timor.

When I learned of this for the first time two years ago, and also of the fact that in spite of great hardships the East Timorese have been carrying on a war of resistance for over a decade, I was sick at heart and recalled what we had done when we occupied East Timor during the Second World War. Sad to say, I had spent the forty years since the end of the war ignorant of what was happening in East Timor. I am deeply moved by the determination of the people of East Timor, who suffered at the hands of we Japanese in the past, and who are enduring so much now in order to achieve their independence. This is what has brought me here today.

I have learned much about this issue from young people in Japan who support the East Timorese. I have learned that the big powers, because of narrow national interests, close their eyes to the injustices committed by Indonesia. The newly developing countries of Africa and the Pacific, on the other hand, support the right to self-determination of the people of East Timor, as do many NGOs and citizens' groups around the world. I can tell you that in Japan, in April of last year, 75 conscientious members of the Japanese Diet sent a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations urging the speedy realization of peace negotiations that include representatives of the East Timorese. Since then, some of these Diet members have questioned the Japanese government in the Diet about its position on the East Timor issue. And last November a Diet League on the East Timor Issue was formed. So although the reaction of the world community has been discouraging, there is also cause for hope.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, and especially Indonesians,

I was stationed in Java for five months before going to the island of Timor. The Japanese army was welcomed there wherever we went. The Japanese government told the people that the war was a holy war and that it was going to build a Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. But what did the war really mean? The 15-year war that began with the Manchurian Incident claimed 20 million Asian victims. It left 3,200,000 Japanese casualties and a land in ruins.

In order to mobilize the people to take part in this war of aggression, it had to be glorified as something noble. At the same time the Japanese government severely repressed freedom of speech, publication, and association. Isn't this exactly what the Suharto government is doing today in relation to the aggression against East Timor?

It never occurred to the Japanese people who went to settle in Manchuria that they were stealing the Manchurian people's land, nor did Japanese soldiers ever dream that they were violating the right to self-determination of the Manchurian people. The people who emigrated to Manchuria as well as the soldiers fighting at the front came from the poor class of Japanese society at the time. They were the people who lost their lives in the war, while those who sent them off are alive today and living very comfortably.

What I would like to say here is that the people who planned the war were members of the military elite, particularly strategists in the Kanto Army. In the name of "anti-communism" they ignored the counsel of the League of Nations to withdraw from Manchuria

(Oct.1931), set up a puppet state, (March 1932), and launched an invasion of China. This is the same as the Suharto regime's invasion and annexation of East Timor. And the very same scorn that the international community directed at Japan in the 1930s should be directed at Indonesia now. Has the Japanese Government given such strong support at the United Nations to the Indonesian invasion because it has seen its own past in Indonesia today? This is a frightening thought.

Just as with the Vietnam war, and the wars now in Nicaragua and Afghanistan, the war of independence in East Timor is a war of aggression committed by a big country against a small country. The relationships between peoples and states, involving as they do economic interests, political ties, ideological differences, etc., are complicated. But wasn't the United Nations founded for the purpose of establishing a lasting peace by people who had lived through two world wars? Wasn't the principle of self-determination established precisely for the purpose of preventing small nations from being trodden on by the interests of large nations?

The Japanese government has never apologized or paid reparations to East Timor for what it did there in World War II: it should. And if it wants to build real friendship with Indonesia, it should tell that country: "We know from experience that no country can escape the judgement of history on a war of aggression. Stop this aggression against East Timor now."

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

In November of last year two Timorese, Monsignor da Costa Lopes and Mimi Ferreira, came to Osaka and told us of the Fretilin peace proposal. It is a very modest and reasonable proposal, and there is nothing in it that one could find fault with. I believe, as Ms. Ferreira said, that "Discussions are the only way to solve this problem." Settle the East Timor issue now! Indonesia, withdraw your troops now and sit down for peace negotiations with Fretilin! You are a big country with 164 million people; don't trample on the 600,000 people of little East Timor! And let the rest of us remember that groveling before the strong while cutting down the weak is the way of fascism.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates,

Back in Japan I am simply one elederly citizen, but I am determined never to forget the crimes Japan committed in World War II, and to act on what I have learned from bitter experience.

Thank you.